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Exclusive interview
with the world's
most famous
teenager on her
18th birthday

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Greta grows up





Planet Greta

On her 18th birthday Greta Thunberg tells *Rosie Kinchen* about sparring with Trump, hanging out with Malala — and why she'll never tell anyone off for flying

Portrait by Evgenia Arbugaeva

It is almost impossible to believe that Greta Thunberg, the Swedish environmental campaigner and pioneer of the school strike movement, is celebrating her 18th birthday today. It feels like only a minute ago that she first appeared on the international stage — an impish 15-year-old prophet of doom telling world leaders they were stealing her future. She looks more grown-up today in

her Stockholm flat when we speak on Zoom just before Christmas: her hair is one braid instead of the usual Pippi Longstocking two, and her face has lost some of its cherubic quality. She is crocheting a blue and yellow tablemat as a Christmas present for her father, Svante — “Let’s hope this doesn’t get published early and ruin the surprise” — and has a 1,000-piece jigsaw laid out on the desk in front of her as we talk. She hadn’t realised her birthday was coming so soon. “It feels very strange,” she says, when I point out the landmark date. How will she celebrate? “I’m not the kind of person who celebrates birthdays very much,” she replies, the first but not the last time in our conversation that I feel 20 years younger than her and not the other way around.

This disconcerting maturity is one of the qualities that first propelled Thunberg on to the international stage, when at the age of 15 she began a “school strike” outside the Swedish parliament to raise awareness of the climate crisis. She was inspired by pupils in the US who had protested against gun laws after a school shooting and had tried to find others to join her, with no luck. She sat on the pavement alone in a raincoat, with a placard and an angry frown that has become quite familiar in the intervening years. Soon camera crews were interviewing her and the news spread around the world, inspiring a movement under the name Fridays for Future. After she spoke at the 2018 United Nations conference on climate change in Poland student strikes took place every week, not just in Europe but in Moscow, India and Hong Kong. In 2019 an estimated four million young people participated in climate strikes inspired by her.

Today environmental policies top the political agenda and for the first time climate change is front-page news. How much of it was driven by her? “Of course we have seen a change in the way we speak about the climate crisis, it has got much more focus now that it had before. The school strike movement could have played a part in that,” she agrees. “But with every day that goes by we can see more evidence that we are in crisis, we can see more symptoms that this is happening all over the world.” She denies that she is the leader of anything — the movement “should not be top down”, she says, but the strikes were



From top: Thunberg, second from right, and her sister, Beata, with their parents in Stockholm, 2007; on the cover of *Time* magazine, 2019; a run-in with President Trump at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York, 2019. Previous pages: arriving by train to join a protest in Madrid, 2019



her idea and were startlingly effective. What better way to jolt the masses out of their complacency than by being lectured over the breakfast table by their own kids; it is hard to think of any other social movement that has been led so firmly by the young.

Thunberg is now a pin-up for the environmentally conscious, a nominee for the Nobel peace prize and *Time* magazine’s person of the year in 2019, at a time when public discourse has never felt more toxic. She has been personally attacked by world leaders including Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump. “If you actually start thinking about where you are and what is being said about you and how much focus you are getting, you would develop a self-image that wouldn’t be very sane,” she says. Instead she understands it as a tactic. “Since people are so desperate not to talk at any cost about the climate crisis, they are going to try to do everything to distract. Instead of speaking about the climate crisis they are going to try to make this a debate about me or my personality or my appearance or my parents or my sister or whatever, so you just have to come to terms with that very early on,” she says.

She has handled it better than most adults would. When President Trump, who took the US out of the Paris climate agreement, tweeted: “Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!” she updated her Twitter biography to say: “A teenager working on her anger management problem. Currently chilling and watching a good old fashioned movie with a friend.” As Trump raged over losing the presidential election, tweeting “STOP THE COUNT!”, Thunberg coolly echoed his “chill” tweet back to him again.

That a teenager could make presidents look foolish is a curious sign of the times. And she is under no illusions about what the election of Joe Biden will bring. “Of course it will mean a change, mainly because it is one and not the other in charge,” she says. “But just because of that shift we shouldn’t be relaxing and thinking everything is all right now.”

She is equally underwhelmed by Boris Johnson’s ten-point plan for the environment, announced with great fanfare at the end of last year. “You can see it in different ways. You could see it as better than nothing, and of course everything is better than nothing, but that plan has also received a lot of criticism from the scientific community, who say that it is not enough to be in line with the Paris agreement.”

This is very much the Thunberg we’re used to: the headmistress grudgingly awarding her elderly pupils a C-minus for effort and telling them to try harder as she sends them out of the door. She refuses to be drawn on specific policies. “If I were to talk about taxes or green new deals then it would become a question about party ➡➡➡

politics and the climate crisis is beyond party politics,” she says. Her mantra is the same as it always has been: “We need to treat the crisis like a crisis and we need to listen to the science.” And under no circumstances should we relax.

That Thunberg ended up in the spotlight at all is accidental. The years before her conversion to the cause were unrelentingly grim. She grew up in a middle-class family in Sweden, the daughter of Svante Thunberg, an actor turned stay-at-home dad, and Malena Ernman, a well-known opera singer. At about 11 years old she developed anorexia, an experience recounted by her mother in the book *Our House Is on Fire*. At first her parents “screamed, laughed, threatened, begged, pleaded, cried and offered every imaginable bribe” to make her eat, writes Ernman. She refused and was eventually treated at the Stockholm Centre for Eating Disorders. Her parents were told to monitor everything she ate and the time it took for her to eat it. A typical entry reads: “Lunch: 5 gnocchi. Time: 2 hours and 10 minutes.”

The psychologist at Thunberg’s school suggested that their daughter might be on the autistic spectrum, but it would be years before they got a diagnosis; then she got several at once. Thunberg was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome — a high-functioning form of autism — obsessive-compulsive disorder and selective mutism. It was only then that her parents began to understand what their daughter had been going through. There is a heartbreaking passage in the book when her father accompanies her to the end-of-year ceremony at school and realises that the other children are openly laughing and pointing at Greta in front of him. When they raise the subject of bullying at home, she is “not relieved or calm, but happy. Exuberantly happy.”

For the next month stories pour out. “It is like a movie montage featuring every imaginable clichéd bullying scenario,” her

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Above: Thunberg speaks at the UN climate summit in New York, 2019. Below, from left: meeting Barack Obama in Washington and the Pope at the Vatican in 2019, and Prince Charles in Davos in 2020. Opposite, from top: an early school strike outside the Swedish parliament in 2018 and on stage in Montreal in 2019 addressing the biggest demonstration in the city’s history

mother writes. “Stories about being pushed over in the playground, wrestled to the ground, lured to strange places.” Treatment her daughter has simply accepted without understanding that it was wrong.

The diagnosis changed all that. “It definitely helped me,” Thunberg says. “You could understand yourself better. You understand why you aren’t like the others, why I’m so socially awkward and so on.” She changed schools, which meant “I could study in the way that best suited me”.

She is clearly intelligent with a voracious appetite for facts. There are clips of her at eight or nine reciting the periodic table by heart. She has called Asperger’s her superpower and still sees the condition as a positive thing: “Some people see Asperger’s or ADHD or any of these letter combinations as something negative, but of course it doesn’t have to be — it can be something you use as an advantage.”

She started thinking seriously about climate change after a lesson in which a teacher showed a documentary about the island of plastic floating in the Pacific Ocean. Thunberg started to cry. Others in the class were distressed too but they moved on when the school bell rang. Thunberg could not. It has been pointed out that people with autism are overrepresented within the climate movement and I’m interested to know why she thinks this is. “Humans are social animals. We copy each other’s behaviour, so if no one else is acting as though there’s no crisis then it can’t be that bad. But we who have autism, for instance, we don’t follow social codes, we don’t copy each other’s behaviour, we have our own behaviour,” she says. “It’s like the tale of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*; the child who doesn’t care about his reputation or becoming unpopular or being ridiculed is the only one who dares to question this lie that everyone else just silently accepts.”

It is a different folk tale that springs to my mind as I talk to her; the Dutch boy with his finger in the dyke. She is not at all emotional when she discusses the environment; she reads, speaks to scientists regularly and is motivated by cold, hard facts. Fame was ➡





just a consequence of her conviction and is not something she enjoys. She gets stopped in the street everywhere she goes except at home in Sweden. It is a cultural phenomenon called *Janterlagen*, or *Jante's law*, she has said: a term used by Scandinavians to describe their cultural inclination towards disapproval of individual achievement. "I know that people see me, I can see in their eyes that they recognise me, and sometimes they point, but they don't stop and talk," she says. "It's nice because I'm being left alone, but it gets very socially awkward because I know they know and it becomes like a game they all pretend."

She copes with it by spending most of her time at home with her family. Her younger sister, Beata, was also diagnosed with Asperger's and OCD a few years ago, as well as ADHD, and the family is a tight-knit unit. Over the years there has been a lot of speculation about the influence her parents have over her profile and her campaigning, but it is very clear when you talk to her that Thunberg thinks for herself. Does it make her feel lonely? She shakes her head. "Of course it is hard to find someone who understands what my life is like, but that doesn't mean I'm lonely because I have so many people supporting me," she says. One of them is Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel prize-winning Pakistani girl who was shot in the head by the Taliban and became a global champion of education for girls. They met when they were filming a series for the BBC and have stayed close. Yousafzai, 23, has advised her to "take care of yourself, to remember that you are probably in it for the long run, so you shouldn't take on too much", Thunberg says.

The one thing she is convinced about is that her fame is going to end as abruptly as it began. "I think it is very strange that this attention and focus has stayed for so long. I won't have this platform any more, so that's why I'm trying to do as much as I can to use my position, or whatever it is, to do what I can in this limited amount of time," she says. She circles back to this over and over again, almost as though she is counting down the seconds until the curtains close.

The curious thing about Thunberg is that on some levels she understands people very well. She writes her own speeches and delivers them as she chooses to. I ask her about the tears; that visceral swell of emotion that makes white-haired politicians squirm and the rest of us wish she wouldn't take life so seriously. Does climate change really hurt her that much? "No, of course not, people think I'm depressed or that I want people to panic, but those are just metaphors to get people's attention. Of course I don't think about the climate like that, I don't sit and speculate about how the future might

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Above: Thunberg has befriended Malala Yousafzai, pictured with her in February 2020 at Oxford University. Below: on board the racing boat Malizia II in the Atlantic en route to New York, August 2019



turn out, I see no use in doing that." I'm digesting this bombshell when she continues: "As long as you are doing everything you can now, you can't let yourself become depressed or anxious."

She is decidedly laid-back about other people's choices too. I ask what she makes of celebrities who talk about the environment while flying around the world. "I don't care," she says. "I'm not telling anyone else what to do, but there is a risk when you are vocal about these things and don't practise as you preach, then you will become criticised for that and what you are saying won't be taken seriously." Nor does she agree that having children is bad for the planet. The whole issue is a distraction, she says, and one that

scares people away. "I don't think it's selfish to have children. It is not the people who are the problem, it is our behaviour."

Her own choices demonstrate what she believes is the right way to live. She stopped flying years ago — she famously sailed to America to speak at the 2019 UN climate summit, a voyage that took 15 days (footage shows her ashen-faced, disappearing out of shot with a bucket). She is a vegan and has stopped "consuming things". What does that mean, I ask. Clothes? She nods. What if she needs something? "The worst-case scenario I guess I'll buy second-hand, but I don't need new clothes. I know people who have clothes, so I would ask them if I could borrow them or if they have something they don't need any more," she says. "I don't need to fly to Thailand to be happy. I don't need to buy clothes I don't need, so I don't see it as a sacrifice."

Thunberg's quiet puritanism is effective. It certainly seems to have worked on the people around her. Her mother's international career ended in 2016 when she decided to stop flying too. None of the other young activists in the school strike movement fly, she says, they are used to communicating on Zoom: "So when the pandemic hit we already had methods to communicate online."

She took a year's sabbatical to travel and has two more years of school before she needs to make decisions about university. Nevertheless she says she is "painfully aware" of the pressure to decide what course her life should take. In fact it's the only time during our conversation that she really sounds like an 18-year-old.

She is studying social sciences: "I wanted to study natural sciences, but then I thought maybe where I will be most useful is in another direction, like policies." She may still change her mind, she says. "My life is so strange and things are changing constantly, so it's hard to plan anything."

How will she know when she has done as much as she can and is free to move on? "That's difficult with the climate crisis because it's such a complex issue. Even though I say in speeches that it's black-and-white, of course it's not black-and-white, there is no magic number that we can surpass." Until then she says she'd like her birthday to be a "promise from everyone that they will do everything they can" for the planet. What about an actual gift, though, something to unwrap on the big day? She shifts in her chair uncomfortably, trying to think of something. "The headlights on my bike are broken, in Sweden it gets very dark in the winter," she says, to keep me happy. I bet she'll just borrow some ■

No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference by Greta Thunberg is out now (Penguin £3.99). Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis is published in paperback on March 4 (Penguin £9.99)